



EMANCIPATORY DISCOURSE OF HOME IN AZAR NAFISI'S READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN: A MEMOIR IN BOOKS

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Abstract

This paper explores how the narrator's migration experience and her nuanced relationship with "home" form the narrative in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003). It also examines the protagonist's unfulfilled longings for utopian worlds, which are frequently articulated through ordinary interactions in a geography of spaces connected to inside/outside, public/private, and East/West. In its depiction of the migrant experience in the host society, this novel adopts an emancipatory discourse. This discourse combines the following elements: a fascination with the immigrant's capacity to transform its identity and adapt to the new home; enthusiasm about the potential opportunities and liberties available in the new society; and a gesture intended to propose "individual agency" as the essential element to "making it" in the host country. The word "home" has a wide range of connotations and interpretations across the research. The protagonist's relationship to both her adopted home and native home is a constant subject of discussion. The novel's portrayal of the adopted home and the place of origin downplays the conflicts that result from the contexts' nuanced historical developments by merely dividing them into binary oppositions between the First World and the Third World. As a result, the issue of "home" challenges both the ideological foregrounding and Nafisi's position in respect to her text.

Keywords: Home, Alienation, Identity, Migration, Feminism

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Azar Nafisi, who currently resides in America, uses her own experience to confront the oppression and alienation of women in Iran. It is difficult to generalise her experience because of her unique privileged position and personal transmigration history, even though she claims it to be emblematic of Iranians in general and Iranian women. When she compares this dyad to the feeling of empathy, the connection between morality and literature is made evident.

The multifaceted memoir, *Reading Lolita*, describes teaching Western literature in late-1990s revolutionary Iran. In defiance of the Islamic authorities in Tehran, it tells the tale of seven women who meet in secret to debate Western literature. Nafisi collects seven of her female pupils to teach them Western literary classics in the privacy of her home after quitting her job as a professor at the University of Tehran due to administrative control over the curriculum and the requirement to wear the veil. The pro-western rhetoric that permeates Nafisi's portrayal of Iran's culture and society promotes Western ideals of freedom and democracy. It also highlights the negative aspects of Iranian life as the narrator perceives them and presents them in such a way that the reader also perceives them as negative.

Critics of *Reading Lolita* typically ignore the narrator's complex relationship with the idea of "home," even though understanding Nafisi's ideological perspective likely depends on how this idea is treated. In the text, the concept of "home" shifts between two meanings: one geographical (the actual location of Iran) and the other abstract (the psychological sense of identity in America). The narrator's alienation during her time in Iran is based on certain political and social realities there, but in her attempt to reestablish a sense of belonging, she resorts to America ideological discourse that democracy is necessary for freedom, implying that this conception of democracy is the only way to live a free life. The narrator has spent more than ten years living in America and has been exposed to Western culture since she was a young girl. She strongly supports America's cultural, social, and political rhetoric of freedom and democracy. Her psychological development is reflected in the text, which indirectly has an impact on "the girls," who, under the teacher's influence, support America's hegemonic notion of freedom as the sole way to "free" the mind from Iran's dictatorial authority. The text subverts this rhetoric of emancipation by constructing incongruous performance spaces where the narrative is forced to choose between a number of false dichotomies: the

narrator opposes the dictatorship while yet being engaged in promoting a different totalitarian worldview.

The narrator in *Reading Lolita* may have a complicated relationship with the idea of "home" before the political upheaval in Iran further complicates and problematizes it. The narrator lives in three different countries for seventeen years by her own volition - Switzerland, England, and America - and endures numerous incidents of departure and return. The work offers a chance to investigate how the narrator's own account of migration, which includes several displacements and changes, confuses, and transforms how she views "home." Home may create a conflict between two meanings that could, in most situations, be congruent, creating tension in the narrative. These definitions include the idea of home as an abstract term defining an emotional state or feeling of self, as well as the idea of home as a geographical location, such as a physical location on a map. While many people's definitions of "home" include both elements at once, it is interesting to note that Nafisi's narrator separates the two elements, emphasising one or the other in a way that distinguishes Iran as her physical home and America as her emotional place of belonging.

The narrator's sense of home during her exile is viewed as the actual location of Iran; her sense of belonging is woven into the fabric of its terrain.

During my first years abroad - when I was in school in England and Switzerland, and later, when I lived in America, I attempted to shape other places according to my *concept* of Iran [my italics]. I tried to Persianize the landscape and even transferred for a term to a small college in New Mexico, mainly because it reminded me of home. (82)

Place-specific lexicon permeates the language employed in this scene to convey a sense of "home." The reader can infer that Iran (the location) is the narrator's home by expressions like "shape other places," "persianize the landscape," and "New Mexico." She emphasises the geographic and architectural scenery in this passage, showing how she equates home with geographical features. In other words, Iran's physicality serves as the foundation for the narrator's sense of place and identity.

After the exile, the narrator returns to Iran, which she originally refers to as "home," when she is thirty years old, realising that "the dream had finally come true." But ultimately, rather than

feeling “at home,” she feels a distinct sense of belonging - only this time, it is unrelated to Iran. In this sentence, another sense of “home” is added; it consists of a collection of behaviours and customs that might be associated with an American lifestyle, whether it be social or intellectual. Even if she can now ‘at last talk in my mother tongue,’ the narrator is now yearning for something else that is ultimately unrelated to the country she used to call home (Iran). The narrator realises that home is not the literal sense of location but rather rests in the abstract notion of dislocation through phrases like “discovered,” “surprise,” and “predicament.”

In contrast to what has been previously suggested, what she yearns for in this line transforms the concept of “home” into a more individualised and private construct. When she returns to her homeland, the concept of home becomes more ambiguous because she realises that home is more about the narrator’s sense of self, which includes her way of living, than it is about a specific location. Her problem is revealed in the realisation that “home” cannot exist, especially if she is prevented from doing the things that make her feel like herself, such as talking about Gatsby or indulging in posh ice cream. Despite highlighting the simplistic comparison she draws between America and Iran, the narrator’s concept of “home” in Tehran shifts from prioritising a physical location with a material structure to favouring the idea of home as an idea and a sense of emotional belonging.

Reading Lolita can be viewed as a narrative of migration in this sense because the author’s decision to return to America is founded on this realisation. The narrator’s exilic experience led to this tight division in the concept of “home,” which is what determines it. In the narrative, there are two different kinds of exile that can be distinguished: the first is the narrator’s voluntary exile, which is typified by her being physically outside of Iran, and the second is more of an intellectual exile that the Iranian government imposes once the narrator returns to Tehran. When Nafisi is sent to study in Switzerland and England as a child, she experiences her first exile. During this time, the narrator’s concept of “home” manifests itself with a focus on the physical feeling of place (Tehran); it endures as an imaginary construct derived from the narrator’s childhood recollection. After her father is imprisoned, she spends a year returning to Tehran, but she believes that ‘home’ has changed.

The narrator comments on the marriage she enters quickly near the conclusion of her first trip back to Tehran: “I was insecure enough to marry at the spur

of a moment, before my eighteenth birthday ... he was insanely jealous ... the day I said yes, I knew I was going to divorce him” (83). She enrolls in the English Department at the University of Oklahoma as the “only foreign student” and they both move to America to pursue their academic careers there. However, the new life with an “insanely jealous” husband is one that is emotionally distressing, difficult, and unsatisfying. She adds that after relocating to Norman, Oklahoma: ““in six months’ time I had reached the conclusion that I would divorce him”” (121). The narrator’s husband steadfastly rejects the concept because he thinks that “a woman enters her husband’s home in her wedding gown and leaves it in her shroud,” as the narrator puts it. It took the narrator three more unpleasant years of suffering before she finally got a divorce.

After that, she deliberately kept her distance from the Iranian community in America since “especially the men” had “many illusions about a young divorcee’s availability,” she says. Where the narrator describes her “persianizing the landscape” and moving to a smaller college in New Mexico that physically resembles the Tehran she remembers, her yearning for “home” deepens, heightened by a sense of loss and nostalgia, which prompts the narrator to search for a sense of familiarity in places, even if they are remotely like Tehran.

The importance and worth of the actual “home” as a metaphor through which people live and imagine other places. He highlights that “home” is where our selfhood (psyche) and imagination are initially formed, relating “home” (as in the physical environment) with the imagination. Thus, when one tries to extract the physical “home” from memory, it is inflated and warped. It becomes obvious that the narrator is emotionally reliving the scene of her “home.” While living in America, she tries to reinforce the happy fixations she associated with Iran. If Iran truly is “home” to her, it alters the way she views other locations. The narrator’s “obsessive yearning for home,” as she describes it, persists after her divorce and this time it is;

shaped into excited speeches against the tyrants back home and their American backers, and although I felt alienated from the movement itself, which was never home to me at any point, I had found an ideological framework within which to justify this unbridled, unreflective passion. (86)

When the narrator joins the Iranian student uprising against the Pahlavi regime, he or she feels

somewhat at home but not quite at home; The oppressors are “back home” in Iran, but her mental state is not connected with the revolutionary cause, which is “never home to me at any point,” as the quotation highlights once more. During this time, the concept of “home” in Iran schematically alternates between two ideas: the nostalgically held childhood notion of “home” and the idealised “home” promised by the revolution.

Concerning the difference between “home” and “the real new and becoming version of “home” in the process of political upheaval, which is discussed in the meetings of the movement and to which she does not feel she belongs,” the narrator is torn. “She felt nostalgic about the familiar Iran, the place of parents and friends and summer nights by the Caspian Sea” (99). As a result, it is possible to identify the boundary between the two notions of home - as a physical location and as an emotional state of belonging - as they pertain especially to Iran and to this period of the narrator’s life. She clarifies: “I then began a schizophrenic period in my life in which I tried to reconcile my revolutionary aspirations with the lifestyle I most enjoyed. I never fully integrated into the movement” (85).

The narrator is still caught in a conundrum in which she tries to reconcile two seemingly disparate and unrelated things: one is feeling at home in America’s lifestyle, which she craves and enjoys, and another is wishing to be home in the actual country of Iran. Neither of these things, taken separately, is satisfying for the narrator. Another thing to note about this is how the physical concept of home separates itself from its literal foundation in Iran’s concrete, bricks, and mortar and discovers its aesthetic evolving into a creative creation. This is shown by the alienation the narrator experiences upon her second return to her “home,” which occurs after the narrator’s first phase of exile - a period of seventeen years of displacement - finally comes to an end after her university studies in America are over and she tries to relocate to Iran. The next section displays the narrator’s mental picture of Tehran, the Tehran she feels she is going back to at age thirty.

When I left Tehran for the first time, it was a hospitable place, with a fine restaurant that hosted dances on Friday evenings and a coffee shop with big French windows opening onto a balcony ... I dreamed of being submerged in them and of never having to leave again. (81)

The narrator’s “home” is caught between reminiscence and reality. The narrator in this passage makes ‘home’ sound nearly idyllic. One can infer that the narrator’s conception of the actual location of “home” is symbolic, fetishized, and infused with past memory, imagination, nostalgia, and dreams from words like “epiphany,” “seductive,” and “dreaming,” as well as from a description that casts Tehran airport, and Tehran by implication, as a vibrant painting suffused with sentimental associations (with people drinking coffee in a French-style-designed restaurant opening on a balcony and dancing

The narrative eventually leads us to understand that “home” might be understood as an imagination construct rather than as an idealised place. Reality differs from what the storyteller recalls or produces. It illustrates how, for her, “home” is a memory that spans seventeen years and has evolved into a manufactured reality as a result of being fuelled, if not completely consumed, by sentiments of longing and loss. Because she is unable to rebuild or reclaim her previous sense of “home,” Iran now seems to the narrator in this excerpt to be a foreign country. This is where the narrator’s alienation comes from. The narrator’s sense of alienation results from the contrast between how she views “home” in her formative years as an expat and how she deals with its reality when she finally arrives.

The narrator of *Reading Lolita* is horrified to discover that her nation is not what she remembered it to be. Her idea of returning home becomes unpleasant and alienating since, according to the text, she believes her vision of Iran to be a genuine nation. As the narrator makes clear, the narrator can only comprehend her concept of “home” in retrospect; it is only via writing this memoir that she is able to compile her thoughts and emotions into a complete understanding of what “home” means to her. In an interview conducted after the publication of her memoir, Nafisi did admit that she knew her perception of Iran was fictitious. This knowledge undercuts the shock of her return as it is described in *Reading Lolita*, and it causes us to reevaluate how to employ shock and alienation to strengthen the ideological impact of the narrative.

America starts to solidify itself into the emotional state of “home” in the narrator’s consciousness when she returns to Iran as an adult looking to settle there. The narrator’s return to Tehran heralds the beginning of a second phase of exile, distinguished from the first by cerebral detachment as opposed to

the physical departure that marked the first. Her entry and departure occurred between 1979 and 1997, which is a difficult phase in modern Iran's political history. The following historical changes are described in the memoir: The Pahlavi dynasty was abruptly replaced by a much more reactionary and dictatorial dictatorship after the Shah departed Iran on January 16, 1979, and Khomeini returned on February 1. Before the narrator's return, in 1977, the Shah's oppressive and corrupt regime came under attack as she took part in the Iranian student movement in America. Marxists, Leftists, Islamists, and theocrats joined forces to overthrow the Shah at this time, but the revolution was mostly Islamic and was spearheaded by Khomeini from outside Iran. Iranians chose to become an Islamic Republic in a countrywide referendum on April 1, 1979. Members of the once united factions who disagreed with the new Islamic constitution began to be executed by Khomeini's dictatorship.

To sum up, it is critical to discuss the implications of this nuanced conception of "home" for the memoir's status as a political statement. The close friend of the narrator in Iran calls the narrator "very American" (175). She states: "was this a compliment? Not particularly; it was merely a fact" (176). In other words, rather than feeling like a native Iranian, she feels more alienated in Iran than an American who lives there might. The narrator's intricate tale about the concept of "home," together with all the alienation it encompasses inside and outside Iranian boundaries - a particular pattern and a special personal trajectory of dislocation - thus serves as the memoir's major framework. Therefore, this point's significance resides not only in elucidating the author's imbrications with the idea of "home," but also - and perhaps more importantly - in the difficulty of generalising her experience as being indicative of Iranians, particularly Iranian women.

Because of her unique background and privilege, the narrator's narrative of transmigration is not representative of all Iranian women, which makes her political stance in the text more personal than representative of all women in Iran. Her account of "home" differs from that of other Iranians, as was previously explained. The narrator often compares her experiences in Europe and America with her life in Iran throughout the text as a result of that narrative. The narrative's rhetoric is constructed in such a way that the oppression in Iran is constantly contrasted with the freedom in America. She also provides a detailed account of the political developments and persecution in the nation from her own point of view, omitting numerous

significant acts and events of resistance, such as the women's movements that took place in Iran during the time period she covers. Nafisi substitutes a completely different ideology for a particular one that is in direct opposition to it rather than acknowledging the complexity of the situation in Iran. She is merely contradicting herself by adopting the American way of life and advocating it as the only viable alternative since she is employing language that is identical to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which limits possibilities to the binary options.

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